

Kansas 'Voluntary' Waste Reduction Programs Praised by the U.S. EPA

Representatives of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recently spent a day in Topeka meeting with KDHE Bureau of Waste Management staff to learn what Kansas is doing to promote waste reduction and conservation. EPA was pleasantly surprised to discover that Kansas' voluntary approach to waste reduction has proven to be a successful model that they intend to share nationwide.

EPA summarized their observations in a letter dated July 18 from Art Spratlin, director of the Region 7 Air, RCRA, and Toxics Division to Ron Hammerschmidt, Ph.D., director of the KDHE Division of Environment. Spratlin praised the Kansas household hazardous waste, composting, and recycling programs.

EPA's current increased interest in state waste reduction efforts relates to their nationwide initiative referred to as the Resource Conservation Challenge (RCC). EPA hopes to partner with states, local governments, and private companies to achieve major goals in reducing the amount of waste dumped into landfills and in conserving valuable energy and material resources.

"We were particularly impressed with the progress of the Kansas household hazardous waste (HHW) program," said Art Spratlin in his letter to Hammerschmidt. Spratlin explained that, "the steady expansion and promotion of the program have resulted in the most extensive network of facilities in any state in the country." Kansas counties presently operate 37 permanent HHW programs serving 81 counties and over 93 percent of the state population.

EPA also considered Kansas' voluntary community composting program to be "impressive." In a state where it is still legal to landfill yard waste, 115 community composting programs have sprung up since 1994 when there were none. EPA learned from the Kansas program that mandates and bans are not necessary to establish a major network of community composting projects. Kansas has used a combination of technical assistance, grants for composting equipment, and encouragement from dynamic composting enthusiasts to expand composting activity. EPA commented that "this non-mandate method has worked well in diverting significant quantities of yard waste from landfills" in Kansas.



EPA also referred to KDHE's new solid waste public education initiative as "impressive" and "worth sharing nationwide as an example of what can be done to improve participation in all reuse and recycling programs." The initiative that has gotten EPA's attention is still under development and scheduled for release this fall. It is called "Get Caught Recycling." KDHE is using in-house resources to produce a series of 30-second videos and accompanying posters that "catch" well-known Kansans in the act of recycling.

-Continued-

“We are pleased that waste reduction practices in Kansas have steadily improved over the past 12 years without mandates or landfill bans,” said Bill Bider, director of KDHE’s Bureau of Waste Management. “While KDHE played a role by providing technical and financial aid to local programs, this progress could not have occurred without good legislative decisions, especially as related to grant programs, and the commitment of hundreds of people from the public and private sectors.”

Each year for the past decade, the municipal solid waste recycling rate in Kansas has increased. In the early 1990s, much less than five percent of waste was recycled. In 2005, the rate could reach 25 percent. As more and more communities implement and enhance recycling, composting, and HHW programs, and as KDHE’s new public education program is launched, this rate should continue to increase.

“I am hopeful that further improvements in waste reduction will occur over the next several years as cities, counties, and private companies continue to discover ways to work together to recover valuable material from the waste stream,” Bider said. “Two big resource conservation goals that we have set for ourselves over the next few years include the establishment of an e-waste recovery system in Kansas and a plan to increase recycling by all state agencies and purchase products manufactured from post-consumer waste when practical.”